
Up and Down

Luke 19:28-40; Philippians 2:5-11

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery at Duke University Chapel on March 24, 2013

After he told the parable of the ten pounds, “[Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” “As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God.” He went up to Jerusalem but down the Mount of Olives. Up and down. He was showered in praise (up) on the way to a place of pain (down). The climax of his journey is Jerusalem but it is a descending apex. A crescendo that peaks with a decrescendo. A descent, not an ascent. He reaches the height of his humanity in the valley of the shadow of death. He went up to Jerusalem but down the Mount of Olives. He went up to go down. This is the paradox of Palm/Passion Sunday. The highpoint is a lowpoint, as low and deep as death. Let me not get ahead of myself.

Things were looking up for Jesus. He took a colt for its first test ride and as he rode, the people spread their cloaks on the road. He was royalty. He was a king of peace. These events fulfilled the prophecies of old. As one reads the words of the other Dr. Luke, there are no hosannas. There are no palms. There are no branches. But there’s still a praise party among the fraternity of the disciples. There’s loud joyful praise for the king in their midst. High liturgical and political praise on the way down low.

In *God’s Trombones*, a collection of sermons in poetic verse, James Weldon Johnson pens,

Up Golgotha's rugged road
I see my Jesus go.
I see him sink beneath the load,
I see my drooping Jesus sink.

Up and down. He was high but stooped low. And the irony is that in Philippians this descent is couched in the form of a hymn. Perhaps music makes the downward spiral of an incarnational God easier to digest. “Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” He was up. “But [he] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” He came down. A descent to death in the triune harmonic melody of love.

Jesus didn’t exploit his divine power and his Trinitarian network of relationality nor did he allow the disciples’ praise to go to his head. Jesus reveals that to go up, one must go down. To be the greatest, one must be the least. To be the first, one must be last. To be a savior, one must be a servant. He demonstrates his supernatural strength through service. Thus he wields royal power through servitude and a humanization process. He becomes human in order to serve us with love. He goes down that we might be lifted up. He takes the road less traveled, the path of humility on a colt toward his own death like a common criminal on an old-rugged cross. Jesus descends to death row in the Jerusalem prison industrial complex. Even if one attempts to camouflage this gory decline in the form of a hymn, we won’t be successful in bleaching Christ squeaky clean even if we take all of the references to blood out of our hymnals.

He went down from the Mount of Olives after he went up to Jerusalem. He goes up to come down as he claims his throne through a descent of humility and reigns through service as a servant king. The central act in the drama of salvation is an act of humble service. He serves salvation through the Incarnation. He was up but came down.

This trajectory is seen even on the heels of the disciples' praise. They barely finish jumping for joy for Jesus in a Cameron Stadium mosh pit when Jesus begins to weep over the city of Jerusalem. Joy quickly turns to sorrow. Sorrow and love flow mingled down. Praise and passion become baptized in sorrow's tears as they flow down to the foot of the cross. Celebration and lamentation, praise and pain, are soaked by the tears of God in Christ who weeps in anticipation of what is to come as he "gets down" in the dance of death.

Up and down. Praise and pomp, one day. Passion and pain, the next. A see-saw situation. Up and down. The paradox of a Palm/Passion Sunday. But isn't this the Christian life? Shouts of praise, acclamation, and celebration, good news, under the shadow of impending bad news, the lament of the crucifixion. A Sunday of contrasts that reveals the whole Lenten journey that culminates in a dying and rising. That when you look up you discover the direction is down. There's no crown without a cross, no triumph without engaging trouble, no resurrection without a crucifixion. You can't pimp the gospel for profits by only preaching prosperity and a bright sunny gospel because the gospel includes pain as well. Life is not just about ups. But there are downs as well. Ups and downs. Palm/Passion Sunday.

Up/down Sunday, representing our lives before God. One day you're planning a family summer vacation in the warm tropics of Hawaii, dreaming of sipping your pina colada while sun-bathing on the beach, but the next day you discover you have stage 3 cancer. One day you're thinking about asking for a promotion at your workplace because things seem to be going grand, but the next day, your boss tells you about the need to downsize the company and you're told that you will be laid off. Choose a scenario from your own life. Up and down. Forest Gump was right—life is like a box of chocolates you never know what you're gonna get.

If you follow the stock market, just when you think things are looking up economically, the market goes down again. If you follow the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, throughout history, there have been times when you think there might really be peace in the Middle East and things are looking up, but then something happens and destroys that possibility, and things go down again. Just when you thought you were really going to get the type of North Carolina barbeque you desired, you end up with a version of Texas barbeque. Or, just when you said "right," you wound up taking the advice of pop singer Beyoncé and went "to the left, to the left." Up and down. A roller coaster reality.

A Christian life that ebbs and flows with joys and sorrows, ups and downs. It is being, in the words of liturgical theologian Don Saliers, at "full stretch" before God. The joyful sorrow of the Christian life in which we find ourselves in a liminal liturgy, betwixt and between palms of praise and the pit of pain. We find ourselves seemingly enrolled in a yoyo religious exercise. "Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down, sometimes I'm almost to the ground...nobody knows the trouble I see" but I still sometimes sing "glory hallelujah." Up and down. Glory and grief. Palm and passion. Praise and lament. It is the inescapable tensive reality of being Christian. We do not live into the fullness of the Christian life without the embrace of both praise and lament, up and down. If we do not embrace this reality, we embody an anorexic piety. Christianity is a spiritual reality, not an institution, in which we live to die and die to live. A doxological reality in which a crucified man is the ground of our thanksgiving. A living Lenten journey that is up and down.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem but down the Mount of Olives. He was showered with warm praise on the way down to the pit of a cold grave. He knew about the ups and downs of life that we endure so much so that "when I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down, when I was sinking down, beneath God's righteous frown, Christ laid aside his crown for my soul." He was up but came down to pick you and me up. "If I ascend into heaven (up), [Christ] is there; if I make my bed in Sheol (down), [Christ] is there." Up or down, he is with us.

Jesus goes down but he's not out for the count. Trust me. I know we hear that 'what goes up must come down.' Well, God runs a re-entry program whose motto is what goes down will come back up.